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SUBJECT: OSCE BAKU HOLDS FIRST ELECTION BRIEFING FOR  
AMBASSADORS

REF: BAKU 454

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: On May 7, OSCE Baku Head of Mission Herrero Ansola held the first of planned monthly election briefings for OSCE member states. He briefed the OSCE members on logistics for the October presidential election, including the likely 11 candidates, as well as planned OSCE technical assistance. Herrero Ansola outlined pending changes to the electoral code and law on freedom of assembly and highlighted continuing, serious problems in the media environment as a key issue that will affect the conduct of the election. Several OSCE member states also expressed concern about GOAJ legal action against the Election Monitoring Center (reftel). We welcome the OSCE Baku Office's stepped-up coordination activities. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On May 7, OSCE Baku Head of Mission Jose Luis Herrero Ansola held the first of a series of election briefings for the Ambassadors of OSCE member states with representation in Baku, as well as representatives of international organizations including the United Nations, the European Union, and the Council of Europe. Herrero Ansola said that OSCE Baku would hold these meetings once a month until the immediate pre-election period, at which point they may take place more frequently. He said the purpose of the meetings was to exchange information on the pre-election period, and to explore areas of potential cooperation. (The OSCE also is organizing regular, working-level election assistance coordination meetings.)

¶3. (SBU) Herrero Ansola briefed the group on election logistics, noting that per the current electoral code, the GOAJ must officially announce the election date 120 days prior, and the campaign period would start 60 days prior. (NOTE: We understand that Parliament may change the draft amendments to the electoral code to require the GOAJ to announce an election 60 days prior, and to reduce the campaign period to 21 days.) Herrero Ansola said there were 11 potential presidential candidates: incumbent President Ilham Aliyev; Umid Party Chair Iqbal Agazade; Azerbaijan Democratic Party Chair Sardar Jalaloglu; Great Creation Party Chair Fazail Gazanfaroglu; Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar; Muasir Musavat Party Chair Hafiz Hajiyevev; Green Party Chair Mais Gulaliyev; Civil Solidarity Party Chair Sabir Rustamkhanli; Whole Popular Front Party Chair Gudrat Hasanguliyev; Azerbaijan Public Forum Leader Eldar Namazov; and Azerbaijan National Independence Party Chair Etibar Mammadov. He also noted that the Azadliq bloc and the Open Society Party might boycott the election.

¶4. (SBU) Herrero Ansola said that the draft amendments to the law on freedom of assembly and the electoral code soon would be discussed in Parliament, and noted that the changes needed to be adopted by May in order to provide adequate time to train election officials on the new procedures. He outlined OSCE Baku's planned election activities, including training

local authorities and election commission members in election procedures; funding a voter education program through the Election Monitoring Center; training domestic election observers; training ITV broadcasting staff; conducting a series of roundtables on the role of media in elections, and between police and media representatives; and conducting joint public assembly management training for police officers (to which the USG also is contributing). Council of Europe (COE) Special Representative to Azerbaijan Denis Bribosia said that the COE was planning election assistance in two areas: training election officials and supporting the media.

15. (SBU) Herrero Ansola said the group must watch to ensure that freedom of assembly be allowed equally to all candidates. He noted the need to monitor media coverage on Azerbaijan's seven television networks, which he said were supposed to cover all candidates. The group also needed to monitor the problem of interference in elections by local authorities, he said, emphasizing that only election officials should be involved in election processes. Finally, he underscored the need for serious support of democracy in Azerbaijan, in order to "avoid the mistakes of others in the region." Herrero Ansola explained that OSCE Baku's mandate and programs were completely separate from that of OSCE/ODIHR, as was ODIHR's official assessment of the election. He said that in order for ODIHR to send election monitors, the GOAJ first must send an invitation letter to ODIHR. At that point, he said, ODIHR would send a team to assess observation needs for this election, and would then field short- and long-term observers.

16. (SBU) The group briefly discussed the Ministry of

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Justice's case against the Election Monitoring Center. (NOTE: This briefing was prior to the court's May 14 decision to deregister and shut down the NGO.) Norwegian Ambassador Jon Ramberg expressed his concern over recent public comments by the GOAJ that were critical of the USG's planned election assistance activities. Ambassador Derse noted that there is a range of views in the GOAJ on this assistance and the U.S. remains committed to providing planned support for free and fair elections this fall. Ramberg pointed out that the GOAJ's negative attitude could have implications for others planning election assistance programs. None of the other states present reported experiencing such problems. Herrero Ansola set the next election briefing for June 2.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Under Herrero Ansola's leadership, the OSCE Baku Office has greatly stepped up its coordination activities. We greatly welcome his initiative, which stands in marked contrast to the OSCE Baku Office's role in the 2005 parliamentary elections.

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